

RADIO HEAD

Wayne Downing will keep hosting 'In the Mood' Tuesday afternoons on KMUN 91.9 FM 'until the voice and the brain give out'

Wayne Downing looks too big for the chair and board in the KMUN studio until he sits down and puts on the headphones. He adjusts the microphone, flicks a toggle or two on the board, and leans into the mic. His mellifluous voice welcomes listeners to "In the Mood," his Tuesday afternoon show. He assures them that the big band number he is about to play, "will melt the buttons off your jammies."

Downing got into radio when he and his daughter, a classical musician, challenged each other to get beyond their comfort zones. She chose to play trombone in an all-woman Dixieland jazz band. Downing volunteered at KMUN. That was over a decade ago. He began with folk music, then looked around for a kind of music that KMUN wasn't already playing. He chose the big band music of the 1920s through the 1950s because his mother liked it, and "In the Mood" is now one of KMUN's most popular programs.

"I thought I knew a lot about the music," Downing says. "I knew nothing, but I'm learning as I go along." He has come to love big bands, and he continues to play them because, "This music is really good. We shouldn't discard Harry James, Woody Herman, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday."

Downing's road to where he is now has been a long and rocky one. Her grew up in a Seattle suburb and entered the University of Washington intending to be a scholar of Shakespeare and the Jacobean era, but the 1960s interfered. "I lost my way for a while. I'm not good at self-management," he says. "I asked myself, 'Why should I be a student when I can be a worker?'"

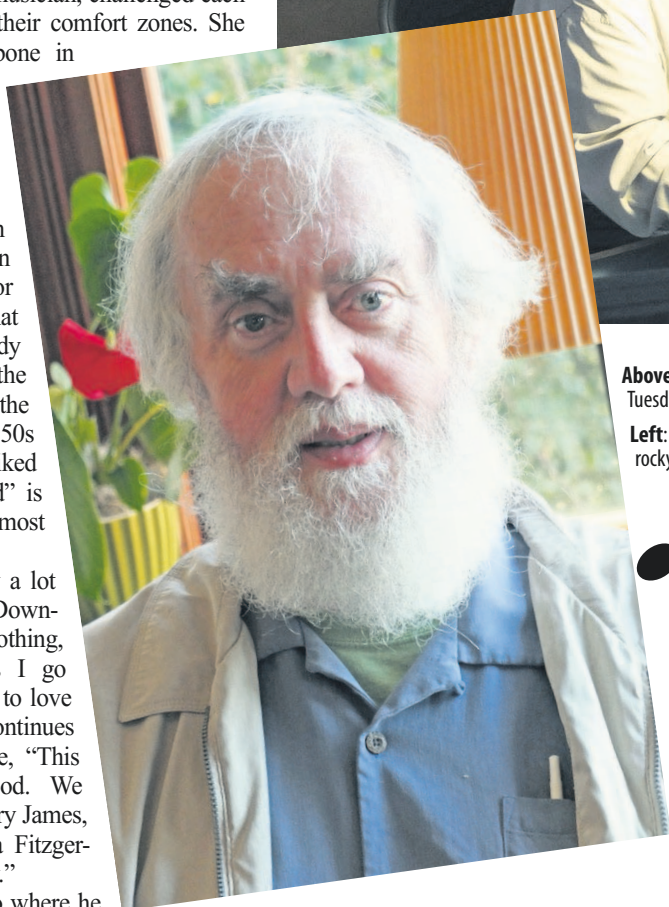
He left school and took a job for 2 dollars



Photos by Dwight Caswell

Above: Wayne Downing hosts "In the Mood," a popular big band radio show, on Tuesday afternoons on KMUN 91.9 FM.

Left: Wayne Downing's road to where he is now has been a long and rocky one, but he is a man at peace with the world.



an hour. "One of my regrets," he says today, "but when you're young you think you're superman."

Then there were what he calls, "the psychedelic misgivings of the '60s," and he began drinking. And smoking. In the end he was sleeping in an abandoned house with police shining flashlights in his face. "That was as low

as I got," he says. "My wife came and got me. She brought me in from the cold. Most women have an incredible power of forgiveness."

Downing "crawled out of the '60s on my hands and knees" and returned to the suburbs.

"The lawnmower, the matching dishes, the PTA meetings," he says. "I really wanted them." He worked as a typesetter and printer "until my job was replaced by the Mac," and he quit smoking and drinking, "because my daughter didn't deserve a jerk for a father."

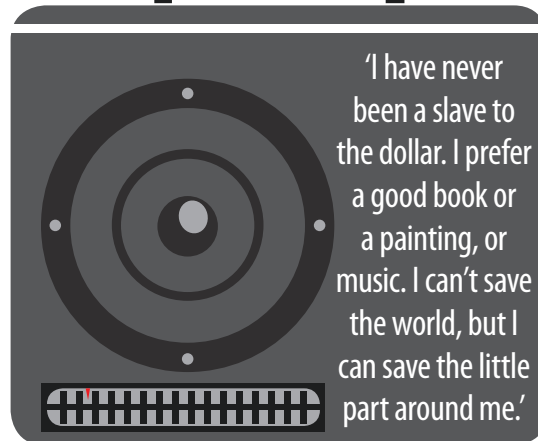
Eventually he and his wife, Cecelia, moved to the coast. "I love the rain, and I really like the people here. I like the volunteer spirit in this part of the world," he says. "In the Mood" and his column in the *Chinook Observer* have now become his life. The column "is my psychiatrist's couch, and KUMN is an island in a great big ocean; only good things happen here."

Downing is a man at peace with the world. "I have never been a slave to the dollar," he says. "I prefer a good book or a painting, or music. I can't save the world, but I can save the little part around me." Downing has reflected on his time on earth, and a conversation with him is full of aphorisms about what is important to him: "Don't get upset; follow your passions; the world is a better place for music; know good people, and be kind to your neighbors." About writing: "Get to the truth, and write what you feel." Downing says, "The key to success in my life has been to keep it simple. Complicate your life, and everything falls apart."

Downing's wife passed away recently, and then he had a bout with cancer that resulted in a five-month departure from radio. "I've changed my mind about living and dying," he says. "I'm okay with it. We all have our time, and I'm coming to the end of mine."

Meanwhile the beauty of music keeps him going. "I've never understood punk rock," he says. "It's about anger, and I'm tired of being angry." So he will continue to play the mostly cheerful big band sounds and old radio shows, "until the voice and the brain give out."

And every Tuesday afternoon he signs off with his signature phrase, "I'll see you on the radio."



Coastal Life

Story by BY DWIGHT CASWELL